A Christmas Carol: Charles Dickens and the birth of orthopaedics

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Introduction

Many of today's orthopaedic hospitals first came into existence early this century as part of a national movement set up to take crippled children away from our overcrowded slums and nurse them back to health in the pure air of the English countryside. The majority of their patients were suffering from tuberculosis, a disease in the young of joints, particularly the hip joint and spine. It was a common condition, and one associated with a high mortality.

Crippled children who survived childhood only did so, however, to become part of a society that had always regarded the lame with suspicion. It was an age-old prejudice, but one much strengthened over the years by such literary figures as Shakespeare's Richard III and Victor Hugo's hunchback Quasimodo. Charles Dickens was the first writer to portray cripples in a more affectionate and deserving light. This paper explores how Dickens first became interested in the plight of crippled children, and how, by writing about them sympathetically, he helped bring about the change of attitude that was to make possible their eventual treatment.

Nicholas Nickleby

In the summer of 1837, Dickens, already a successful writer at the age of 25, decided to rent a summer cottage at Broadstairs on the Kent coast, in order to plan his next book.

That book was *Nicholas Nickleby*. In chapter XL, Nicholas asks his friend Tim Linkinwater about some flowers growing in the back-attic window of a nearby tenement. Tim replies:

'They belong to a sickly bed-ridden hump-backed boy and seem to be the only pleasures, Mr. Nickleby, of his sad existence. How many years is it . . . since I first noticed him, quite a little child, dragging himself about on a pair of tiny crutches? When it is fine weather, and he can crawl out of bed, he draws a chair close to the window . . . we used to nod at first, and then we came to speak. Formerly, when I called to him of a morning, and asked him how he was, he would smile, and say, better; but now he shakes his head, and only bends more closely over his old plants. The night will not be long coming when he will sleep, and never wake again on earth. We have never so much as shaken hands in all our lives, and yet I shall miss him like an old friend.'

In contrast to this urban scene, Dickens later describes a visit to the country, and the half-naked gipsy children to be found living there (Chapter L):

It is a pleasant thing to know that the sun has been there; to know that the air and light are on them every day; that their limbs are free, and not crippled by distortions'.

Dickens concludes with a wish:

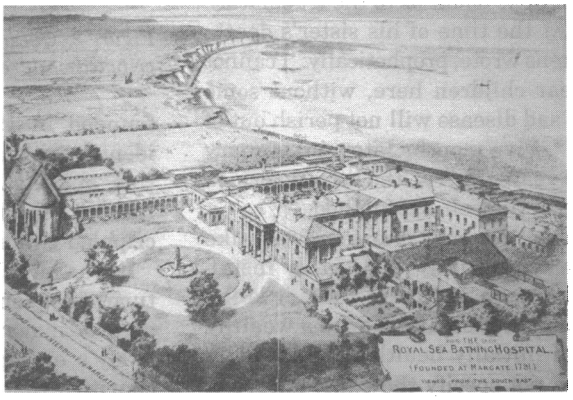

Figure 1. The Royal Sea Bathing Hospital, Margate. Largely unchanged today, it is said to be the oldest orthopaedic hospital in the world (Margate Library)

'God send that the old nursery tales were true, and that the gipsies stole (city) children by the score!'

It is significant that Dickens's interest in crippled children appears to date from his first summer holiday at Broadstairs since only 4 miles along the coast, at Margate, an establishment had existed since 1791 to provide London's sick - and especially their children - with the benefits of fresh air[1] (Figure 1). Dickens was an enthusiastic walker, and knew Margate well, and since it was his habit to visit institutions of all kinds in his search for material, it seems certain that it was at this establishment, now the Royal Sea Bathing Hospital, that he first learned the value of fresh air in treating the crippling diseases of childhood.

Tiny Tim

Dickens returned to the theme of crippled children with *A Christmas Carol*, written in 1843. In Stave III, the ghost of Christmas present takes Scrooge to the fireside of his clerk, Bob Cratchitt, to find Bob relaxing with his family after Christmas dinner:

'[Tiny Tim] sat very close to his father's side upon his little stool. Bob held his withered little hand in his, as if he loved the child, and wished to keep him by his side, and dreaded that he might be taken from him.

"Spirit", said Scrooge, with an interest he had never felt before, "Tell me if Tiny Tim will live".

"I see a vacant seat", replied the Ghost, "in the poor chimney-corner, and a crutch without an owner, carefully preserved. If these shadows remain unaltered by the Future, the child will die".'

This last sentence demonstrates the understanding that Dickens had formed of the links between poverty and disease, and with *A Christmas Carol* he finally succeeded in awakening the nation's conscience to a

problem it had previously been content to ignore. However, a sad twist of fate was soon to remind him that, although disease was more common in the poor, it was far from being their exclusive property.

Dombey and Son

In November 1839, shortly after Dickens had completed *Nicholas Nickleby*, his sister Fanny gave birth to a son, Henry Augustus Burnett, known to the family as Harry. Although initially healthy, Harry gradually developed a deformed back. Dickens's sister was herself to be diagnosed as suffering from consumption in 1846 (and was to die from it 2 years later) so there can be little doubt as to the true nature of Harry's illness. At the time of his sister's death, a grief-stricken Dickens wrote, prophetically: 'I cannot look around the dear children here, without some misgiving that this sad disease will not perish out of our blood with her'[2]. Five months later, in January 1849, at the age of 9 years, Harry, 'the little deformed boy of my poor sister' himself succumbed.

Dickens's next novel, *Dombey and Son*, was, like many others, published initially in monthly instalments. Appearing between 1846 and 1848, it is the story of Paul Dombey, the son and heir to a wealthy merchant. Although initially healthy, Paul fails to thrive. Dickens does not specify the exact nature of Paul's illness, but several references to the child's back, and to the fact that he 'occasionally seems about to lose the use of his limbs' leave little doubt as to what he had in mind.

In chapter VIII of *Dombey and Son*, sea air is recommended for Paul and he is sent to the seaside boarding house of Mrs Pipchin at Brighton, a town which owes its origins to the then widely held belief in the therapeutic power of the sea. Sadly however, after an initial improvement, Paul suffers a relapse and dies.

At the time this chapter was written, the real-life Harry had himself been sent to live in Brighton. Harry is often said to have been the inspiration for Paul Dombey, but on balance this seems unlikely, since Dickens actually completed chapter XVI - in which Paul dies - in January 1847, 2 years before Harry's death (and only a short time after his sister's illness had been diagnosed). To have predicted Harry's death in this way would surely have shown a quite remarkable lack of sensitivity to his sister's feelings.

The children's alderman

Dickens devoted much of the 1860s, the last decade of his life, to a series of public readings of his works. Present at one such reading was a young carpet manufacturer, William Treloar. Treloar went on to devote his life to helping crippled children, and, many years later, he explained how hearing Dickens read about Tiny Tim had been his inspiration[3].

After being elected Lord Mayor of London, Treloar launched an appeal, 'The Lord Mayor's Little Cripple Fund', for a home to enable crippled children from the cities to enjoy, for the first time in their lives, the pure air of the English countryside. The Lord Mayor Treloar Cripples home at Alton in Hampshire, opened in 1908. It quickly became, and remains to this day, a major orthopaedic centre[4].

Dickens's novels were read by both rich and poor alike, and the sympathy he had created for crippled children influenced many, not least Queen Alexandra (Figure 2). The Alexandra League of Children was

Figure 2. Queen Alexandra, Sir William Treloar (left) and crippled children (Lord Mayor Treloar Hospital)

founded in 1909 to encourage the able-bodied to identify with their less fortunate brothers and sisters; this, and the Alexandra Rose Day (now celebrating its 80th year) raised enormous amounts of money for crippled children everywhere.

It was largely thanks to Dickens that, around the turn of the century, crippled children had become an area of major philanthropic activity, and many of today's orthopaedic hospitals owe their origins to charities that were formed at this time. There is, however, another reason for orthopaedics to be grateful to Charles Dickens.

Our Mutual Friend

In 1849, the year that Dickens' nephew died, the entire British Empire boasted not a single children's hospital. Strangely, however, when the first hospital for sick children finally opened its doors at No. 49, Great Ormond Street in 1852, it was not greeted with the enthusiasm that might have been expected. The public had over the years developed a healthy suspicion of workhouse infirmaries and other such institutions, and within a short time of opening, Great Ormond Street Hospital nearly closed through lack of patients. Several years later, it was lack of money that threatened it with closure.

On both occasions, Charles Dickens, the children's friend, was asked to help and responded magnificently. Dickens visited the hospital, and wrote about it, not only in *Household Words* a magazine which he edited, but also in *Our Mutual Friend*, his last completed novel. Furthermore, by chairing a dinner in support of the hosptial and by giving a public reading of *A Christmas Carol*, he raised well over £2000, sufficient a sum, according to *The Times*, to 'physic all the sick children in the United Kingdom'[5]. There can be little doubt that without Dickens's help this famous hospital would have closed[6].

Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital had not, however, come into existence in order to help crippled children, who were still generally regarded as untreatable; in any case, its position, close to some of the worst slums in London, made it unsuitable for this purpose. It was two remarkable Great Ormond Street nurses who were to show the way ahead.

The Sea Side Hospital

In 1874, Miss Edith Vizard, who had been matron of Great Ormond Street Hospital at the time of Dickens's death, and her friend Miss Margaret Cunninghame-Graham, took charge of a recently opened children's convalescent home at Rhyl, on the North Wales coast[7].

Figure 3. Commemorative plaque, Royal Alexandra Hospital, Rhyl

The Sea Side Hospital and Convalescent Home, now the Royal Alexandra Hospital, has an almost pivotal place in orthopaedic history. Not only was it the first children's hospital to use fresh air as an integral part of treatment (Figure 3), but it was also here that Hugh Owen Thomas of Liverpool first demonstrated the splints and frames which were later to revolutionize the management of deformed joints[8].

It was also here, in 1887, that the remarkable crippled nurse Agnes Hunt began her training. Several years later, Agnes Hunt set up an open-air convalescent home for crippled children in the small Shropshire village of Baschurch - the first such establishment to be situated away from the sea - using for the purpose a makeshift collection of cowsheds. Here, she and the pioneering orthopaedic surgeon Robert Jones finally developed the first systematic treatment of crippled children (Figure 4).

Although Robert Jones's inspiration had come from his uncle and teacher, Hugh Owen Thomas, Agnes Hunt herself never forgot the debt which she owed to the Great Ormond Street nurses who first taught her the value of fresh air[9]. Baschurch, the first open-air orthopaedic hospital in the world, exerted a magnetic attraction, not only for crippled children, but also for young doctors from around the world, and it would surely not have been lost on Dickens that the specialty which, in the war-torn years ahead, was to relieve so much human suffering was itself born in a manger.

Figure 4. Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt at Baschurch

Dickens's legacy

Charles Dickens died in 1870, at a time when the plight of crippled children was still generally considered hopeless, and yet it was only 5 years later that Hugh Owen Thomas first demonstrated his revolutionary principles. Sadly, another quarter of a century was to pass before they were finally accepted.

The Spirit of Tiny Tim continued to live, and to inspire others, long after the death of its creator. Many novels written around the turn of the century were to feature crippled children, and it was reading one of them, Juliana Horatia Ewing's *The Story of a Short Life* that was to inspire Mrs Grace Kimmings to form another charity to help London's crippled children. The name of her organization, the League of Brave Poor Things, reflected the caring - if patronising - attitudes that had, thanks to Dickens, now replaced the hostility of a previous generation. In 1904, the League opened a boarding school and hospital for crippled children at Chailey, in the heart of the Sussex countryside. Chailey Heritage, as it is known today, was to play a central role in the expansion of orthopaedics that was now imminent.

One of the reasons why the plight of crippled children had been so slow to improve over the years had been the reluctance of general surgeons to recognize the need for orthopaedics as a separate specialty, but the outbreak of the First World War made change inevitable. On first signing up, Robert Jones had been appalled at the lack of facilities for treating wounded soldiers, and it was due to the campaign which he fought for their treatment and eventual rehabilitation that Chailey became the first of many military orthopaedic hospitals to be set up around the country (Figure 5)[10].

One of the most famous was at Alder Hey in Liverpool. Half a century before, after visiting the workhouse that once stood next to it, Dickens had written, in *The Uncommercial Traveller*, of his own revulsion at the way the nation once treated its war heroes:

'Before going to their wards to visit, I enquired how they had made their triumphant entry there. They had been

Figure 5. Crippled children, wounded soldiers and an open air shed - Baschurch, 1914-18

brought through the rain on carts and had been carried upstairs on the backs of paupers. The groans and pains during the performance of this glorious pageant had been so distressing as to bring tears to the eyes of the spectators, but too well accustomed to scenes of suffering.'

Dickens had been a frequent visitor to Liverpool during the 1860s, and, although there is no evidence that he and Hugh Owen Thomas ever met, their shared interests would surely have given them much in common. There can also be little doubt that he would have had much in common with Robert Jones who, at the end of the First World War, helped turn the now redundant military hospitals into a nationwide network of open-air country orthopaedic hospitals for crippled children. Although the principles of treatment there - rest, good food, and, above all, fresh air - may seem old-fashioned today, the results were at the time regarded as near miraculous.

Charles Dickens, who understood the value of fresh air far better than most doctors of his day, would have been delighted. If proof of this is required, it is surely to be found in the record of a conversation that took place during the 1920s between Robert Jones's friend, Sir Walter Lawrence and Dickens's (by then) elderly daughter Kate:

'One day I told her of a great friend, who had hospitals for crippled children, and when I said that I had seen what I thought were miracles wrought by Sir Robert Jones, she sat up in her old armchair and flushed. "Tell me about that again". So I told her how these crippled little folk cheered as Sir Robert's healing face appeared; how bright the waiting was; how happy the fulfilment. Then she said:

"How my father would have cheered! *How he would have led the cheering!*"'[10]

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